Homemaker as Citizen

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The Iowan Homemaker as Citizen

Child Labor Legislation

By ONICA PRALL and MARY LAYTON

Contrary to the belief of many people, Child Labor is not a new problem resulting from the factory system. Rather, it is an age-old custom and since child labor is cheap labor it will therefore be in existence so long as no laws forbid it. The primitive apprenticeship system of the medieval guilds beneficial regulations were imposed. Conditions grew harder, however, as the factory system grew. Existing laws and regulations of the various states in which child labor was employed, Massachusetts followed in 1836 by requiring children under 15 years employed by a manufacturer to attend school three months a year. By 1860, seven eastern states had passed similar laws. As a nation we do not believe in child labor; yet 1,096,588 children between the ages of 10 and 15 years are at work in the United States, according to the census of 1920, and not one state in the nation is Innocent. Some of our farmers as well as Michigan beet fields and New York tenements are only a few of the places employing child labor. As has been noted above, states differ in their regulation of child labor. This gives the states with lower standards of child labor legislation the advantage, financially, over the others. On the other hand, the populations of the various states are interchangeable and there is nothing to prevent a person who grew up under favorable conditions in one state from becoming a citizen of Ohio, which has high standards of child care. In such a case, Ohio pays the cost of health work, in charity in terms of ignorance, or in the low grade work which this untrained worker turns out. It is quite clear then that child labor is a national problem and cannot be dealt with satisfactorily by the individual states.

Two attempts have been made by the Federal government to prevent selfish utilization of child labor. The Keating-Owen bill, passed September 1, 1918, prohibited the shipment in interstate or foreign commerce of goods produced in establishments in which children were employed in violation of certain age and hour standards. It went into effect one year later, administered by the Children’s Bureau of the Department of Labor. On June 3, 1918, it was declared unconstitutional, however, by the Supreme Court, on the grounds that it was an infringement on the reserved rights of the states. Since that time it has been ruled constitutional. Congress has put this question of child labor squarely to the states, which means that the only method now necessary for thirty-six states to ratify the amendment, when Congress will be given the power to regulate child labor. The amendment worded protects the states whose legislative standards may be superior to those Congress sees fit to adopt and at the same time enables Congress to bring backward regions up to a level which public opinion generally will support as a national standard.

Organized women, churches, labor unions and newspapers have been behind this amendment, seventeen national women’s organizations having definitely gone on record as favoring the amendment. Opposition has been mainly from employers who profited from such labor and from citizens who were temperamentally opposed to strong centralized government and inclined toward a belief in states rights. These two forms of opposition have gradually diminished, but the proposed amendment has given rise to new and unexpected opposition in the farmers.

Opponents to this amendment have tried in many instances succeeded in prejudicing people against the idea of amending the Constitution, saying it will prohibit children from doing any farm work at all. This, of course, is a misrepresentation. Work performed by children on farms is purely for family direction and without interference with school attendance, providing the hours are not too long, is not child labor. Work performed by children away from homes for wages, long hours, under conditions which endanger health, education and morals, is child labor and is susceptible to legal control on equal terms with industrial labor. The current agricultural depression is also used as an argument against the amendment, but the depression is due to over rather than under-production.

In industry we find many startling situations in the state of New York alone. 250,000 children are gainfully employed under eighteen years of age; 22,000 do not benefit by the Workmen’s Compensation Act, which is only useable if the child misses two weeks of work due to injury. From July, 1920, to July, 1921, 2,600 were injured seriously enough to be taken out of work. Tan of these boys died. Fifteen accidents occurred where children were required to clean mixing machinery. The elevator law, which states that no person under eighteen years of age may operate one, is frequently violated.

The greatest sinners are not the cities nor industrial centers, but the farmer, and the South is the principal offender. In the whole United States one in twelve children between ten and fifteen years of age is at work in the South every four is so engaged. The number of children employed in 1920 was less than those in 1910, according to the United States census, but the 1920 census was taken in January during the industrial and agricultural depression and also during the time that the Act of 1919 was in effect. Miss Grace Abbot, head of the United States Children’s Bureau, states that there has been a general increase in child labor of 57 per cent since the Supreme Court’s decision.

In the beet fields of Michigan working conditions are unbelievable, due to the so-called “family wage.” A Poland family with nine or ten children will be entitled to the “nice” farm for the summer, care paid both ways, a home, firewood, and garden plot, also to be given. It is very encouraging until they reach the farm and find that the “home” is a two-room wooden shack which had been used as a cow stable until a few seasons before. Children between ten and fifteen years go into the fields at four in the morning with a still younger sister as housekeeper and nurse for the still younger baby. Education is a thing to be crammed in three short months, in classes with children much smaller and brighter.

The practice of putting children in the movies is another problem. Film companies are required to educate these children but the results are for the most part unsatisfactory. Infant prodigies are forced to do all manner of daring and dangerous stunts in order to startle the public. Surely we do not want to be entertained at the expense of immature children.

Manufacturers who oppose the amendment say that the reasons for it are purely sentimental. This we realize is not true, for the situation as it is does not allow any education or physical and moral training for a large number of our children, and will eventually make for physical degeneracy of the race.

Another common objection is that this would interfere with business. Prices would be raised and then our manufacturers could not compete with other countries where there is no regulation. This is a not a logical argument either. In fact there is not any good reason, as we who are interested in the welfare of our children can see, why the amendment as proposed should not be adopted. If it is not then we should “renounce our claim as a place among civilized nations.” Secretary of Labor, Davis sums it up when he says, “If we could arm four million men to make the world safe for Democracy, we can change our constitution to make our country safe for our children.”

Three Ames Students at LeMars.

Three Ames students, Jeanette Tye, Miss Christensen and Dorothy Cass are teaching at LeMars this year.